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## Recreation—Parks and Other Outdoor Spaces

### Description:

In 1900, most Americans lived in rural areas and on farms and had plenty of fresh air, ready opportunities for exercise, and easy access to greenery as part of their daily routines. Today, more than 80 per cent of Americans live in metropolitan areas, and the growing population in many of these areas carries with it increased demands on existing parks and outdoor recreational facilities. Many community leaders understand the benefits of planning for parks and outdoor areas, and community gardens flourish in many urban places, providing a park-like setting for visitors and a place for urban dwellers to garden.

Recreation has physical, psychological, economic, and environmental benefits, all of which help people stay mentally and physically fit. Park and outdoor recreation areas located close to home or to other often-used amenities are the most beneficial, as people are more likely to incorporate a visit or a stroll into a daily routine if parks and trails are close to home or to other community resources such as senior centers, libraries, and shops. The farther away parks, trails, camps, fishing, and natural areas are from home, the less likely people are to visit them.

Municipalities can relatively easily make a variety of recreational options available to a community's various members (including older adults and individuals with disabilities), all of whom might enjoy walking, bird watching, bocce ball, golf, shuffle board, tennis, swimming, tai chi, boating, gardening, or many other activities.

### Benefits:

*For residents of all ages:*

- Improved physical and mental health—
  - Regular physical activity improves fitness, lowers blood pressure, and is a tool in the arsenal to combat obesity and diabetes.
  - Exercise can be a mood-elevator, alleviating depression and anxiety, which is especially important for frail older adults and younger individuals with disabilities, as both groups are vulnerable to social isolation and limited social networks.
  - Parks and other green recreational areas that provide comforts and amenities, such as benches, tables, games such as chess or checkers, exercise and fitness paths, public restrooms, telephones, lighting, first aid stations, water fountains, and accessibility features will foster an increased sense of security and attract greater use of these areas by residents of all ages, especially young children, older adults, people with special needs, and individuals with disabilities. This encourages a balance of resident-users, which promotes a greater sense of community.

*For residents and communities:*

- Community gardens transform vacant lots into productive and beautiful neighborhood spaces, which can beautify the neighborhood, give residents a sense of accomplishment, improve community members' access to fresh fruits and vegetables, and reduce food budgets.

*For communities:*

- Social benefits:
  - Recreation areas are an element of a livable community, providing areas for residents of all ages to meet socially and interact—strengthening community identity and a vibrant sense of community.
  - Well-maintained recreation areas within neighborhoods provide good socializing and activity opportunities for children and teenagers, helping to mitigate undesirable behaviors that can emerge from "having nothing to do."
  - "Nature Centers" serve as an in-park community center for public education, recreational activities, resident-socialization, and volunteer opportunities for residents of all ages and abilities.
- Environmental benefits:
  - In parks and other outdoor recreational areas, trees and shrubs absorb air pollution, improving the quality of the air we breathe.
  - Trees provide shade and cool the earth, which is nature's version of natural air conditioning.
  - Trees and bushes provide a filter system for the pollutants in storm water run-off, helping to keep such pollutants from entering storm drains and going into rivers and streams.
  - Parks provide an effective habitat for wildlife, especially for migrating birds in urban areas. Waterfront areas are rich ecosystems.
- Economic benefits:
  - Homes and businesses that are in close proximity to parks and outdoor recreation areas have shown increased property values.
  - Parks and waterfront developments featuring walking paths and trails promote tourism and bring local tax dollars to the community.
- Social benefits:
  - Parks and open-spaces recreational areas provide places for all socio-economic groups to mix and socialize, promoting interaction and helping to stabilize neighborhoods, which, in turn, can engage the interest of multiple resident groups in community planning and community efforts, and reduce crime.

**Impediments or barriers to development or implementation:**

- During trying fiscal times, the decision to expend scarce resources to upgrade parks and purchase land to dedicate to open space becomes increasingly challenging. In some places, parks close; in others, maintenance is deferred.

- Park and recreational areas that are not well-maintained (and, therefore, not used by many people) can attract vandalism and other crimes.
- Existing parks may lack necessary comforts, amenities, and ADA accessibility compliance. They may be older and designed only for passive recreational needs, and do not meet today's recreational and fitness preferences and options among all age and ability groups, such as bicycling, swimming, Tai Chi, trekking, and others.
- Paths and trails may not be connected between municipalities, reducing recreational choices that regional trail systems would provide.
- Assembling parcels to create new parks in developed areas is complex and expensive and, even when done successfully, is a very long process.

**Resource—statutory authority:**

- Reservation of park land on site plans containing residential units:
  - Town Law §274-a(6);
  - Village Law §7-725-a(6);
  - General City Law §27-a(6).
- Reservation of park land on subdivision plats containing residential units:
  - Town Law § 277 (4);
  - Village Law §7-730 (4);
  - General City Law §33 (4).

**Resource—examples:**

- *Universal Access Program*—highlights recent improvements to recreational facilities on New York State lands for accessible camping, fishing, boating, bird watching, and exploration of natural areas. Albany, NY: New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.  
<http://www.dec.ny.gov/environmentdec/39010.html>.
- *Hudson Valley Greenway Act of 1991*—authorized the planning of a 150-mile greenway from Battery Park in Manhattan to Troy, New York. The Hudson River Valley Greenway promotes a voluntary regional strategy for preserving scenic, natural, historic, cultural, and recreational resources.  
[http://www.hudsongreenway.ny.gov/Libraries/PDF\\_s/GreenwayAugust2008.sflb.ashx](http://www.hudsongreenway.ny.gov/Libraries/PDF_s/GreenwayAugust2008.sflb.ashx).
- *New York City policy*—leashed dogs are welcomed in New York City parks, and unleashed dogs are allowed in certain designated areas.  
<http://www.nycgovparks.org/facilities/dogruns>.
- *Capital District Community Gardens*—manages 46 cooperative neighborhood food gardens in New York's Capital Region. The organization organizes annual

street tree-plantings in the Capital District municipalities of Troy, Cohoes, Green Island, and Rensselaer, and operates the Veggie Mobile, a mobile produce market that makes fresh produce more affordable and accessible for low-income, inner-city residents. <http://www.cdcg.org/>.

- *San Antonio River Walk*, San Antonio, Texas: [www.thesanantonioriverwalk.com](http://www.thesanantonioriverwalk.com).

**Resource—written and web:**

- *Local Open Space Planning Guide* (2004; reprinted May, 2007), Albany, NY: New York State Department of State. A collaborative project of the New York State Department of State; New York State Department of Environmental Conservation; New York State Department of Agriculture and Markets; New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation; and the Hudson River Valley Greenway—which sets forth a simple step-by-step process for preparing a local open space conservation plan, recommends specific strategies and techniques for conserving open space, and includes useful sources of information.  
[http://www.dos.ny.gov/LG/publications/Local\\_Open\\_Space\\_Planning\\_Guide.pdf](http://www.dos.ny.gov/LG/publications/Local_Open_Space_Planning_Guide.pdf).
- Paul Sherer (2006), *The Benefits of Parks: Why America Needs More Parks and Open Space, the Benefits of Parks*. San Francisco, CA: The Trust for Public Land. [www.childrenandnature.org/uploads/parks\\_for\\_people\\_Jul2005.pdf](http://www.childrenandnature.org/uploads/parks_for_people_Jul2005.pdf).
- The Nature Conservancy—its mission is to preserve the plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.  
National Office: Arlington, VA: <http://www.nature.org>.  
Nature Conservancy—New York State Office:  
<http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/newyork/>.  
Nature Conservancy—New York City office:  
<http://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/newyork/placesweprotect/newyorkcity/>.